

**Peter Fenves's Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time:
Dialogism in Absentia**

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WORKING PAPER

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Abstract

A rereading of Peter Fenves's readings of leading texts among Benjamin's early writings (circa 1914-19; readings contained in Fenves's important work *Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time*. Of chief concern here is a crucial lacuna in Fenves's idea of Benjamin's thought, a blind-spot that reveals, in relief, Benjamin's radical and consistent rejection of a fundamental Cartesian/Kantian premise: what is commonly termed the *ergodic axiom* (aka "identity axiom"). In these early writings, it is argued, Benjamin was indeed constructing a new philosophical foundation, residing in dialogism. And remarkably, an almost identical foundation simultaneously was being built in Russia by Mikhail Bakhtin and Valentin Volosinov, leading members of the Bakhtin circle (1918-1929).

1. Objective

This paper is a rereading of Peter Fenves's readings--contained in his important work *Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time*--of Walter Benjamin's early writings. We focus on five major texts, three of which are considered in detail by Fenves: "Two Poems by

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Friedrich Holderlin” (1914/15), “On Language as such and on the Language of Man” (1916c) and “Fate and Character” (1919). These texts squarely raise the principal issues surrounding messianic reduction and the shape of time as understood by Benjamin, and hence Fenves does a great service by providing serious, nuanced readings of them.¹

The two other pieces we discuss are “Trauerspiel and Tragedy” (1916a) and “The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy” (1916b). Their virtual absence from Fenves’s book—given their obvious connection to the other three pieces—highlights a crucial lacuna in Fenves’s comprehension of Benjamin’s thought. This is of prime interest to us. The lacuna reveals, in relief, Benjamin’s radical and consistent—but nonetheless overlooked—rejection, in these early writings, of a fundamental Cartesian/Kantian premise: what is commonly termed the ergodic (aka identity) axiom.² What Fenves does not see, then, is that Benjamin is constructing a new philosophical foundation, residing in dialogism, one that remarkably was being erected independently in Russia by Mikhail Bakhtin and Valentin Volosinov, leading members of the Bakhtin circle (1918-1929).³

2. The Poetized (Chs. 1, 2)

In reference to a statement made by a participant in Benjamin’s fictional dialogue, “The Rainbow” (1915), to wit, “the absolute exists only in intuition,” Peter Fenves (Ch.2: 44) suggests that this principle, putatively advanced by Benjamin, is nowhere to be found in the slightly earlier work, “Two Poems” (1914/15). He takes this to indicate a crucial movement by Benjamin toward neo-Kantian thought. But if anything, even in the relatively early piece, “Two Poems,” Benjamin is moving *off* that philosophical base. The “timid poet” of the second Holderlin poem “becomes one with the world.” The poet’s words are (literally) the pure experience of the other. To that extent,

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Benjamin has already made Husserl's neo-Kantian leap; the "phenomenological reduction" and then some.

The poet does not have to fear death; he is a hero because he lives [at] the center of all relations. *The principle of the poetized as such is the supreme sovereignty of relationship*, shaped in the particular poem as courage—as the innermost identity of the poet with the world (Benjamin, 1915: 34).

Fenves sharply locates the phenomenological reduction in the movement from "the absolute exists only in intuition" in Husserl's *Logical Investigations*, to a "phenomenological law" (Linke; cited by Fenves: Ch. 2: 51), asserted in the later-written *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and a Phenomenological Philosophy*, and best expressed as, "having the courage to receive whatever in the phenomenon is actually appearing" (Husserl, 1913, 264).

The point of the phenomenological reduction lies in courage: instead of assuming that appearances are supported by underlying substances, the phenomenologists are charged with the task of simply *seeing what gives itself to be seen* (Fenves, Ch. 2: 46).

Beyond that, however, there is a clear dialogical aspect of the timid poet that Fenves is overlooking. Rather than marking Benjamin as a not-yet-neo-Kantian, it foreshadows a very early and radical detachment from both the phenomenologists (Husserl), and the rationalists (Cohen). This, despite the fact that, as Fenves emphasizes, Benjamin was very familiar with the major strands of neo-Kantian thought, not least because of his personal acquaintances with Scholem and many other leading thinkers of the time.

The dialogical aspect of Benjamin's thought appears clearly in the assertion that "[t]he principle of the poetized as such is the supreme sovereignty of relationship." The principle speaks to the poet's absorption of the very subject of the world, at the expense of his own: "the innermost identity of the poet with the world." The timid poet is lost *in the words* in which he experiences the

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world. But the poet, as subject, commands the words in which the world is experienced; that is, the poet “seizes hold of the living.” And Benjamin makes clear that the timid poet is to be understood as a limiting case, and hence that it is a broad philosophical-historical stance he is taking; one which subsumes its aspect as a theory of aesthetics.⁴

‘Timidity’ has now become the authentic stance of the poet. Since he has been transposed into the middle of life, nothing awaits him but motionless existence, complete passivity, which is the essence of the courageous man—*nothing except to surrender himself wholly to relationship*. It emanates from him and returns to him. Thus poetry seizes hold of the living, and thus they are known to it—no longer related. Poet and poetry in the cosmos of the poem are not differentiated. The poet is nothing but a limit with respect to life, the point of indifference, surrounded by the immense sensuous powers and the idea, which preserve the law of the poet in themselves (Benjamin, 1914/15: 34-5).

Here we have the key elements of a *social relativity theory* akin to that which began to be expressed a few years later by the Russian dialogicians of the Bakhtin circle (see Todorov, 1981; Holquist, 1990). The works of the Bakhtin circle apparently were unknown to Benjamin, as his works were to them, although it is hard to confirm negatives (see Beasley-Murray, 2007: 4-8). Russian dialogism explicitly reduces the phenomenological to the relationship between self and other, in language. The subject necessarily is social, in the first instance, because the self is a “living participant” in the social whole (Bakhtin, 1922/24: 2; Volosinov 1929: 13). The individual subject is actively engaged in a state of dialogue, orienting the self through experiences of and activities as part of the whole.

As we will discuss further, in the context of his key work on language “On Language as such and on the Language of Man,” Benjamin observes that the social whole cannot be experienced, as such, precisely because language is itself in it. In the writings of Bakhtin and Volosinov language is said to be the *transgradient* of the semiotic,⁵ in which the world as *social whole* is alive, and whereby the

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subject's experience in it and effect on it are communicated. Along dialogical lines, then, the timid poet—who, it goes without saying is a genius of language—effectively is Benjamin's personification of social relativity; one might say, of the social aporia. In the limit, the poet (the poem) poetizes—exposes—the life of the whole. Fenves omits any reference to this in his discussion of “Two Poems”. The consequence is a rather convoluted and textually questionable conclusion that he tentatively reaches by the end of Chapter 1: that Benjamin ultimately finds himself at an intellectual *cul de sac* which (ironically perhaps) silences him.

At the end of “Two Poems” Benjamin... is at a loss for words. The technical term for which he searches in vain would name something that runs counter to myth without falling back into traditional mythology. The absence of this term is no small failure, moreover, for it is bound up with the meaning of the “the poetized.” A schematic version of the argument that leads Benjamin into a place where words fail him would proceed as follows. The poetized can be broadly denied as the artistic task that a particular poem fulfills, and the pure poetized is in turn ,the task that poetry as such fulfills; in filling out the categories of the poetized as the “transitional sphere” between poem and life, however, “aesthetic commentary” provisionally relies on certain categories of myth, especially fate or destiny. Pure aesthetics can thus be characterized as the philosophy of myth—but once again, only to a certain extent. At a certain point the poetized not only departs from traditional mythology but gains freedom from its own “mythos,” as well. The law of identity in this way gives rise to a counter-law of difference; at some point in its transition from the unity of the poem to that of life, the sphere of the poetized can no longer be described in terms of the categories through which it is generated. Enigmatically—yet precisely—Benjamin identifies this murky point where divine and human spheres converge (Fenves, 2011, Ch. 1: 38-9).

Compare this to the succinct conclusion Benjamin himself reaches in “Two Poems”, making clear the centrality of social relativity, and hence of the dialogical, to the subject's experience of the social whole.

In the end it cannot be a matter of investigating ultimate elements, for the ultimate law of this world is precisely connected—as the unity of the function of that which connects and that which is connected. But an especially central site of this connectedness must still be noted, one in which the limit of the poetized with respect to life is pushed forward

farthest, and in which *the energy of the inner form shows itself all the mightier, the more surging and formless is the life* that has been denoted. *At this site the unity of the poetized becomes perceptible...* (1914/15: 2).

3. The Messianic Reduction (Ch. 2, 3)

Fenves (implicitly) helps unpack the first of a short set of Benjamin's so-called "Aphorisms."⁶

The idea of comedy is the human being as logical subject. The human being as subject of tragedy is ironic. – The tragic mask: the expressionless countenance. The comic mask: the pure face (1916/17: 70).

In "Fate and Character" (1919) Benjamin observes a connection between *answerability* ("guilt")⁷ and "fate" that transcends the *messianic reduction*. Answerability is personified by the mythic (messianic) tragic hero, whose own acts are ultimately revealed to him; the breaking of the severest taboos, a son having sex with his mother and killing his father, and so on. The "tragic mask" is the stunned look-- "expressionless countenance"-- of the self in the moment that the paradoxical question is posed by the *active subject*: What have I done?

With explicit reference to the Nietzschean "birth of genius"--and it can be added, adumbrating Kafka--Benjamin observes in "Fate and Character" that absent the Gods, and hence absent redemption by the Gods---the *messianic reduction*--the answerability of the Shakespearian (non-messianic) tragic hero is corrupted by moral relativism ("infantilism"), and ceases to be mythic. Instead it is a judgment, a declaration of guilt, the violation of law. Nonetheless, paradoxically, the "fate" of the Shakespearian hero is still revealed to him. The subject is still effectively acted upon, but with the messianic reduction there is no explicit "subject of fate.": "It is not ... really man who

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has a fate; rather the subject of fate is undeterminable. The judge can perceive fate wherever he pleases; with every judgment he must blindly dictate fate” (Benjamin, 1919: 307-08).⁸

The messianic reduction leads to the programme of science; the “natural attitude” as referred to by Fenves (2011, Ch.2: 74), and often associated by Benjamin with the philosophy of Nietzsche. Science, in the words of Benjamin, is “a concept of fate... that is completely independent of that of character, having its foundation in an entirely different sphere... a natural sphere” (1919: 308-09). The subject is reduced to nature, whereby the act, “[has] no more to do with ethics or morality than fate has with religion” (1919: 309). And the expressionless countenance of the tragic hero, one might infer, is no longer one of stunned guilt, but of infinite wonder at the forces of nature. Fenves points out that, with respect in particular to consciousness, the reduction “overlooks phenomena and posits systems of decipherable signs instead” (2011, Ch. 2: 74). And, in Benjamin’s view, the scientist (like the fortune teller) seeks to read human destiny from the “nature in the human being”--*e.g.*, neo-Darwinism--or as Benjamin characterizes it toward the beginning of “Fate and Character,” in a language of the “exterior of an *active* human being” (1919: 305).

It is no accident that both orders [of the natural sphere] are connected with interpretive practices and that in chiromancy character and fate coincide altogether. Both concern the natural human being, more exactly the nature in the human being, and precisely this announces itself in the signs of nature, either those that are there by themselves or those that are given through experimentation (1919: 309, as translated in Fenves, Ch. 2: 74).

Unfortunately, Fenves does not elaborate on Benjamin’s larger argument in “Fate and Character”, but instead makes a lengthy detour (extending through the third chapter) into an aborted attempt by Benjamin to connect a conception of shame and infantilism of the child to both his theory of language (in particular his conception of color), as well as that of guilt and moral

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infantilism, personified by the reduction of the mythic hero. However, early on, Fenves is forced into the desultory admission that “Benjamin says nothing further about the messianic in this context. And in a certain sense the sudden appearance of the term can be interpreted as a sign of an insuperable impasse: in colloquial terms, the sphere of childhood and that of adulthood never converge” (2011, Ch. 2: 77).

What we find, in looking more deeply into “Fate and Character,” is that the aphorism referred to at the outset of this section, encapsulates the structure of the piece. It concludes with a discussion of the comic hero, whose mask is indeed one of innocence, not guilt. The comic hero is, in the words of the aphorism, “the human being as logical subject...the comic mask a pure face.” Benjamin observes that, as opposed to the tragic hero, the comic hero’s *personality* (“character traits”) is undetermined, and the subject of fate is the object of the reduction. The singular *logos* of the comic hero’s acts and the consequences of them, is that which amuses the audience. And on account of this any external moral, psychological *or biological* determination of the act is of no concern, and is even a hindrance to, the comic effect.⁹

It is never in themselves, never morally, that the actions of the comic hero affect his public; his deeds are interesting only insofar as they reflect the light of character... The sublimity of character comedy rests on the anonymity of man and his morality, alongside the utmost development of individuality through its exclusive character trait... Complication becomes simplicity, fate freedom. For the character of *the comic figure is not the scarecrow of the determinist*. It is the beacon in whose beams the freedom of his action becomes visible. (1919: 310-11).

Fenves makes one indirect but nonetheless telling reference to Benjamin’s juxtaposition of the tragic and comic heroes in “Fate and Character,” casting Benjamin as a rationalist “To the extent that the character trait in comedy is similar to the constitutive marks or characteristics of a logical term, which exhaustively determine its meaning, the art of comedy is akin to the science of logic

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(2011, Ch. 2: 75).” This is a misunderstanding. Benjamin makes it clear in “Fate and Character” that the unique logic of the comic character is *undetermined*, unknowable except in the act. It is that which “reflects the *light* of the character... the beacon in whose beams *the freedom of his action becomes visible*.” Fenves is led in the wrong direction by the larger thesis he seeks to develop as the book proceeds: that Benjamin in these early writings is struggling to *effect* conceptually a messianic reduction, and is unable to resolve the contradictions he himself (i.e., Benjamin) perceives in this endeavor. As such, Fenves virtually reduces Benjamin to a failed, if interesting, neo-Kantian.

But such an understanding is belied in the first few pages of “Fate and Character” (pages not addressed by Fenves). In the second paragraph of the piece he suggests an alternative, dialogical approach (without using that term), aptly captured in the title of one of Bakhtin’s most important works: “Toward a Philosophy of the Act” (1922/24; also see Volosinov, 1927, Chs. 1-2: 7-26).

It emerges that the traditional conception of the nature and the relationship of character and fate... is false, because the distinction on which it rests is theoretically untenable. *For it is impossible to form an uncontradictory concept of the exterior of an active human being [whose] core is taken to be character.* No definition of the external world can disregard the limits set by the concept of the active man. *Between the active man and the external world all is interaction,* their spheres of action interpenetrate; no matter how different their conceptions may be, their concepts are inseparable (1919: 305).

In this context Benjamin exposes the contradictions inherent in the messianic reduction that putatively lead him to a *cul de sac*, as per Fenves’s reading of the text. He engages directly in a critique of Nietzsche, from whom he is clearly separating himself.

Nietzsche says, “If a man has character, he has an experience that constantly recurs.” That means: if a man has character his fate is essentially constant. Admittedly, it also mean: he has no fate—a conclusion drawn from the Stoics. If a concept of fate is to be attained, therefore, it must be clearly distinguished from that of character, which in turn cannot be achieved until the latter has been more exactly defined. On the basis of this

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definition the two concepts will become wholly divergent; where there is character there will, with certainty, not be fate, and in the area of fate character will not be found (1919: 306).

This is an indication that by 1919, at least (actually, since 1916), far from arriving at a *cul de sac*, Benjamin is leaving behind neo-Kantian philosophical issues, with the exception of those posed by Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard and so on.

The discussion of comedy that concludes “Fate and Character”, then, completes a demonstration that the subject in relation to the act—once “genius has replaced God”—can neither be personified by the tragic hero, nor the comic one, but, implicitly—and dialogically—contains both. The active subject is a living element in the social whole. Benjamin conceives of a specifically dialogical social relativity, always contextualized and contextualizing, and hence always *in creation*.¹⁰ In this vein, Benjamin concludes “Fate and Character” with a reference to a dictum he ascribes to Hermann Cohen: “[E]very tragic action, however sublimely it strides upon its cothurnus, casts a comic shadow, in its most appropriate context” (cited in Benjamin, 1919: 311).

4. The Shapes of Time (Ch. 4)

Fenves points to the work of the mathematician Felix Hausdorff (quoted in Ch. 4: 108-09), as an important influence on Benjamin’s understanding of time, mostly via Scholem. In particular, Hausdorff, in 1914—as Benjamin does shortly thereafter—refers to “historical time,” but Benjamin generally uses this term to refer only to the continuous moments of the social whole in creation, also called “unfulfilled” or “open time,” which he distinguishes from the discrete, “completed events” of the social whole, variously termed “tragic,” “fulfilled,” or “closed time.” Fenves brings out that Hausdorff’s formulation fueled the mathematical discovery of fractals: continuous functions that are

nonetheless non-differentiable at any point (2011, Ch. 4: 106-18). As a mathematical expression of historical time, the social whole, at any point is determined (the dependent variable) by the acts of subjects, who are in turn undetermined (the independent variable). Fenves observes that Scholem turns this around, rendering it messianic by positing that fulfilled time is the independent variable (at the whim of the Gods), and unfulfilled time the dependent one: “a great differential equation that expresses the world” (2011, Ch. 4: 109).

Fenves indulges in quite a bit of speculation about one isolated two-sentence aphorism, which he sees as significant to Benjamin’s thought in relation to Scholem’s messianic rendering.¹¹ By the same token he makes it clear that in fact Benjamin by no means pursues a mathematical approach to conceptualizing time. To the contrary, Benjamin identifies spoken language (the “language of man”)--which subsumes mathematics (itself a language of a particular logic)--as the transgredient of human experience (2011, Ch. 4: 117). Fenves is thus led to another desultory conclusion, in line with his broader understanding of Benjamin’s thought. Benjamin, he proposes, being unable to address the (neo-Kantian) “problem of mathematics and thinking,” circumvents it by turning from mathematics to semiotics. In doing so, Benjamin’s conception of messianic time--referred to by Scholem as “Zion,”--is seen by Fenves to end in a *cul de sac*: “The absence of mathematics ... means that ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’ cannot pursue either of two related problems ... those of thinking and Zion (2011, Ch. 4: 117-18).”

“Fate and Characters” is prefigured by two other short works of Benjamin’s, written in the latter half of 1916 (along with “Language as Such...”): “Trauerspiel and Tragedy” (1916a) and “The Role of Language in *Trauerspiel* and Tragedy” (1916b). These are later incorporated into Benjamin’s book, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1924/25). In “Trauerspiel and Tragedy”, Benjamin

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addresses directly the messianic reduction in relation to the *shape of time*. Yet strangely enough—given Fenves’s central concern with this topic, indicated by the book’s title—it is left unread. It is of interest then, in consideration of Fenves’s thesis, to look into what Benjamin has to say in the matter.

Benjamin immediately departs from any mathematical approach, drawing an ontological distinction between, on the one hand, unfulfilled (“historical”) time, the experience of active subjects, “infinite in every direction and unfulfilled at any moment,” and, on the other hand, tragic time, in which the subject’s thought (“idea”) is completed in language. This signifies a fundamental incommensurability of these shapes of time.

[W]e may say that the determining force of the historical form of time cannot be fully grasped by, or wholly concentrated in, any empirical eventuality. Rather, an event that is complete in historical time is altogether indeterminate [experientially]; it is, in fact an idea (1916a: 242).

The reduction of the mythic tragic heroes of antiquity to those of Shakespearian tragedy, then, personifies the shaping of fulfilled time. The latter is no longer a determination by the Gods, the unknowable, all-knowing and all-encompassing subject of fate, which Benjamin describes as “the idea of fulfilled time [that] appears in the Bible as its dominant historical idea, as *messianic time*.” Instead, with the messianic reduction the shape of time is now that of individual fulfilled time (1916a: 242). Adumbrating “Fate and Character,” Benjamin connects the idea of individual time with the moment when the tragic hero’s act is revealed (captured in the image of the tragic mask). Unfulfilled time, in this moment, is usurped by the individual’s fate--fulfilled time--but the individual fate is now bereft of divine guidance, it is not messianic, but rather is undetermined.

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He discerns what he characterizes as “almost a paradox” inured in the structure of tragedy: a series of decisive moments (“stages”) in unfulfilled time culminating—“when tragic time bursts open”—in the revelation that, in essence, the acts in unfulfilled time did not occur. Benjamin, then, suggests that which he later arrives at again in “Fate and Character” (1919), the messianic reduction fosters a programme of natural science that is romantic insofar as it assigns answerability (n.4) to nature, and therefore nature absorbs into it the active subject (1916a: 242-43). As in the “Fate and Character,” however, Benjamin is making the larger point in “*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy” that the messianic reduction does not bear on the tragic in one crucial sense: the tragic critically implies the death of the hero—of the active subject—whether the shape of fulfilled time is messianic or not. Put in the terminology of “Fate and Character,” in *both* shapes of time, character is swallowed up by fate.¹² Benjamin does observe that the tragic hero’s fate is an “ironic immortality.” The Shakespearian tragic hero dies twice, first as active subject in unfulfilled time, at the moment of the tragic revelation, and second—no longer existing in unfulfilled time—as a being that must cease to be alive “because no one can live in fulfilled time.” This over-kill, Benjamin concludes (ironically one presumes) “is the real expression of the hero’s guilt” (1916a: 243).

Interestingly enough the parallel between “Fate and Character” and “*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy” extends to the very structure of the thesis advanced in both pieces. Corresponding to the comic hero, the active subject discussed in the former, is here the *Trauerspiel* itself, which, either as historical drama or re-enactment, is the art of re-creating experience in unfulfilled time (Benjamin, 1924/25: 63). This is clearly articulated by Benjamin in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*:

Historical life, as it was conceived of at the time is [the *Trauerspiel*’s] content, its true object. In this it is different from tragedy. For the object of the latter is not history, but myth, and the tragic stature of the *dramatis personae* does not derive from rank—the absolute monarchy—but from

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the pre-historic epoch of their existence—the past age of heroes
(1924/25: 62).

Benjamin perceives a dialogical articulation of social relativity embodied by the *Trauerspiel*, one that recalls the conclusion reached in the earlier “Two Poems” (and echoed later in “Fate and Character”), to wit:

[I]t cannot be a matter of investigating ultimate elements, for the ultimate law of this world is precisely connected—as the unity of the function of that which connects and that which is connected. But an especially central site of this connectedness must still be noted, one in which *the energy of the inner form shows itself all the mightier, the more surging and formless is the life* that has been denoted. (1914/15: 2).

Benjamin analogizes the shape of time in the *Trauerspiel* to “one branch of a hyperbola, whose other branch lies in the infinite” (1916a: 243). The inner-life of the social whole (“the infinite”) is revealed by its active subjects in unfulfilled time, each individual residing in “the restricted space of earthly existence,” each engaged in dialogue with and within the infinite, until death. He calls attention to the dialogical aspect of the *Trauerspiel* by noting its characteristic even number of acts (1916a: 243). And he observes that the characters in the *Trauerspiel* being royalty, is another expression of the form’s dialogical foundation. Even in this limiting case of the royal subject—Kafka’s emperor of China¹³—there is no escaping “the peculiar mirror-nature of game and play”. (1916a: 243-4).

In concluding “Tragedy and *Trauerspiel*,” Benjamin writes, “The *Trauerspiel* artistically exhausts the historical idea of repetition; it thus fastens on a problem that is completely different from that of tragedy” (1916a: 244). The mirror-nature of the two branches of Benjamin’s hyperbola implies that a particular work in the form of the *Trauerspiel* functions as a case study (an example) and, as such, it marks “temporal repetitions” (synonyms) of the social whole in fulfilled time. The

artistic exhaustion takes the reflection in the mirror to the infinite, the historical-philosophical equivalent, perhaps, of the poetized whole.

Repetition is known only in the limit; “repetition escapes from repetition in order to repeat” (Lyotard, 1987: 153). Thus, while a particular work in the form of the *Trauerspiel* contains a dramatic resolution, it is not an absolute one. The content of the work comprises self/other dialogues of active subjects that exist dramatically in *open--unfulfilled--time*, implying that the state of the social whole in fulfilled time is fundamentally uncertain.

The nature of temporal repetition ... is such that no closed form can be based on it. And even if the relation of tragedy to art remains problematic ..., it nevertheless remains in every case a closed form. But the *Trauerspiel* is in itself unclosed and the idea of its resolution no longer lies within the realm of drama. And here is the point where—proceeding from the analysis of form—the distinction between tragedy and *Trauerspiel* decisively emerges ... (1916a: 244).

This amounts to the rejection of the ergodic axiom (n. 2). The sharp distinction between tragedy and *Trauerspiel* which Benjamin makes here indicates his dialogical train of thought. Along with the programme of natural science, Neo-Kantian rationalism--central to which is the problem of “thinking and mathematics”—also is confined to closed time. Neither leaves an opening for the *Trauerspiel*.

5. Language (Ch. 5)

Prior to addressing Fenves's reading of “On Language as such and the Language of Man”—Benjamin's substantial contribution to the birth of social semiotics—it is instructive to look at the connection Benjamin makes between language and the shape of time in the very brief “Role of Language in “*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy,” a kind of cadenza to “*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy,” and a bridge

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linking Benjamin's thought in "*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy," to that in "Language as such ..." (the three works having all been written within a matter of months). The thrust of Benjamin's insights in "The Role of Language ..." (and they are considerable) is generated by the realization that the crucial tragic moment "rests on a lawfulness governing the spoken word between human beings" (1916b: 246). The act in open time, as such, is singular, within an infinite whole, and therefore the tragic revelation is purely that which the act communicates to subjects in the course of dialogue (language). A corollary is that language exists *only* in closed time. "[N]o tragedy exists outside human dialogue and there is no form of human dialogue other than tragic" (1916b: 246).

The introduction of language adds depth to the ontological distinction between unfulfilled and fulfilled time with which Benjamin begins "*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy." It points directly to the striking convergence of Benjamin's thought and that of Bakhtin and Volosinov, each arriving at the conception of language as *transgredient* (n. 5) to experience, thereby constituting the active subject's (self-evident) consciousness. Volosinov and Bakhtin clearly root the transgredient in the dialogical. Language is the sole "plane of consciousness" in which self and other connect and differentiate.

In life we do this at every moment: We appraise ourselves from the point of view of others, we attempt to understand the transgredient moments of our very consciousness and to take into account through the other ...; In a word, constantly and intensely, we oversee and apprehend the reflections of our life in the plane of consciousness of other men (Bakhtin, 1920/24: 15; translation is in Todorov, 1984: 94); also see Volosinov (1929, 25-41).

Benjamin, in "The Role of Language ..." *illustrates* language as transgredient by citing the emotional effect ("mourning") on the audience over the dramatic course of the *Trauerspiel*." Tragedy engenders an awareness of the "ruling force--the indissoluble and inescapable law of orders that attain closure" (1916b. By contrast, in the open time of the *Trauerspiel* emotions are generated by the

transgression, what Benjamin terms “the word in transformation,”¹⁴ which is intrinsically dialogical, or, as Benjamin would have it, it becomes symphonic (“music”).

The word in transformation is the linguistic principle of the *Trauerspiel*. There is a pure emotional life of the word in which it purifies itself by developing from a sound of nature to the pure sound of feeling. ... It describes a path from natural sound, via lament, to music (1916b: 247).

The dialogical nature of the *Trauerspiel* is revealed, then, in the “musical principle of language” (1916b: 247) of which it is constituted. It is fundamentally “symphonic.” The transgression occurs through “splitting [the drama] into characters.” These are experienced by the audience members as a web of self-other dialogues in open time that enter their own dialogues. In that way the *Trauerspiel*, like the timid poet, provides a glimpse—poetizes--the social whole.

The larger point that Benjamin makes in this context is that the emotional effect ultimately derives from the stark uncertainty of open (“historical”) time in which the characters are being observed by the audience. This is experienced by the audience through what Benjamin describes as a characteristic dramatic path taken by the *Trauerspiel* “from natural sound to music”:

“[M]idway through this passage nature sees itself betrayed by language, and that tremendous stemming of feeling becomes mourning. ... These plays represent the stemming of nature ... to which a new world suddenly opens up in the word, the world of ... unfeeling historical time ... (1916b: 247).

He then concludes “Role of Language ...” with a brilliantly brief one-sentence annotation: “Whereas in tragedy the eternal immobility of the spoken word prevails, the *Trauerspiel* gathers the endless resonance of its sound” (1916b: 249).

Benjamin’s crucial insight in “Role of Language ...” is that the tragic revelation is purely that which the tragic act communicates to subjects in language (dialogue). It is empty (“unimaginable”),

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except in language. In “On Language as such ...” he expands this conception to accommodate the wider, largely unexplored realm of social semiotics. Benjamin begins this piece by positing the identity of conscious (“mental”) and linguistic being.” All objects consciously grasped by the subject are done so *in* language not *through* it. “We cannot imagine a total absence of language in anything” (1916c: 315).

“The ‘German language,’ for example, is by no means the expression of everything that we could—theoretically—express through it, but is the direct expression of that which communicates *itself* in it (1916c: 315).

In asserting this identity, Benjamin radically and explicitly announces a departure from existing neo-Kantian semiotics (“linguistic theory”), associated primarily with the thought of Charles Peirce (see Petrilli and Ponzio, 2005: Ch. 10: 437-40). The latter’s thought, Kant’s, is rooted in Descartes’ meditations of an isolated subject, as is Husserl’s phenomenology (Husserl, 1929, Introduction: 1-4). But coupled with this assertion of identity, Benjamin makes clear that since that which communicates itself in language is an *idea* (“mental entity”) “it is obvious that the idea is *not* language itself, but something to be distinguished from it” (1916c: 315).

In this context, Benjamin first sets out the chief semiotic issue whose resolution “On Language as such ...” (which Fenves loves to point out, Benjamin referred to as his “little treatise”) is intended to effect. Benjamin reasons that if in the “first stage” of theorizing one hypothesizes the qualitative distinction between the subject’s idea (“mental essence”) and the language that communicates it, then the identity of conscious and linguistic being appears to be “a deep and incomprehensible paradox.” (Benjamin leaves it up to the reader to infer that such an identity rules out an *a priori* existence “external” to the subject and therefore it would appear to contradict the initial hypothesis.) This is to say, the identity of conscious and linguistic being leads to an “abyss”

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threatening Kantian thought with a plunge into solipsism. Benjamin proposes that instead of this, by initially hypothesizing the identity of conscious and linguistic being, one finds that the conundrum of solipsism not only contains a solution, but the solution is also one that lies at the heart of linguistic theory.

The view that the mental essence of a thing consists precisely in its language—this view *taken as a hypothesis*, is the great abyss into which all [neo-Kantian] linguistic theory threatens to fall, and to survive suspended precisely over this abyss is its task. The distinction between a mental entity and the linguistic entity in which it communicates is the first stage of any [existing] study of linguistic theory, and this distinction seems so unquestionable that it is, rather, the frequently asserted identity between mental and linguistic being that constitutes a deep and incomprehensible paradox, the expression of which is found in the ambiguity of the word *logos*. Nevertheless, this paradox has a solution at the center of linguistic theory, but remains a paradox and insoluble if placed at the beginning.” (1916c: 315).

Fenves’s absence of attention, throughout the book, to the dialogical aspect of Benjamin’s early writings, is especially telling in his reading of “On Language as such” He views it through the lens of existing fragments of an earlier letter from Benjamin to Scholem on the ‘infinitely difficult theme of language and mathematics,’ out of which evolved, according to Fenves, into “On Language as such . . .”. Based on this he attributes to Benjamin the premise that language “is based on and refers to nothing beyond itself.”

Benjamin eventually dropped the mathematics and produced, instead, a “little treatise” on language alone. The starting point for the letter and for the resulting treatise is nevertheless the same. “Every language communicates itself. The self-communicating character of language means that it is based on, and refers to, nothing beyond itself (Fenves, Ch. 5: 131). Benjamin arrives at this thesis by means of a reduction that is *more apparent in the fragments of the letter than in the subsequent thesis* Ch. 5: 131).

But such a position, whatever might be gleaned from fragments of a letter, is explicitly rejected by Benjamin in “On Language as such . . .” As cited earlier, he writes “it is obvious that the

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mental entity [idea] is *not* language itself but something to be distinguished from it” (1916c: 315).

And this is then central to his avoidance of the abyss. Benjamin’s precise claim, which Fenves seems to misread, is that the subject is not conscious of any idea that does *not* communicate itself in language. Language, in that sense, both is based on and refers solely to ideas that can be communicated. Any particular spoken language absorbs ideas into itself, via dialogue, via the renewal, alteration, creation and disappearance of words. It is only in words that the subject has access to not only the other, but to the self as well.

The incomparable feature of human language is that its magical community with things is ... purely mental, and the symbol of this is sound. The Bible expresses this symbolic fact when it says that God breathes his breath into man: this is at once life and mind and language (1916c: 321).

Hence, Benjamin hypothesizes the identity of linguistic and conscious being. In this context, Benjamin singles out language as the prime example of an idea that does not communicate itself *in language*, and therefore is constrained to only “communicate itself.” The set of sounds, as objects of nature, but experienced as spoken language, are not, themselves, experienced *in language*.¹⁵ For example, one who wishes to understand a particular foreign language only has recourse to a translation from another language that is already understood, a conversion of one set of sounds (“symbols”) into another set. But there is no recourse to a language of sounds as such. There is no language into which the sounds can be absorbed. Hence, what human language communicates in, as Benjamin states, is “itself”; that is, a consciousness of self and other. An important implication is that the social whole, which as such contains language within it, except in the poetized limit perhaps cannot communicate itself in language either (see Volosinov, 1929: 12-13, 25).

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Fenves compounds his misreading of the phrase “language communicates itself” with a confusing reading of Pierce into Benjamin’s critique of Neo-Kantian semiotic theory; notably its reliance on the ergodic axiom. And lost inside the consequent lacuna, is left Benjamin’s far-reaching solution to the paradox of solipsism. Of note, by Fenves’s own account his conclusions rest on Benjamin’s correspondence, not the actual piece. He asserts:

The task of the letter can ... be formulated as follows: develop a theory of language based on its circular structure without describing the circle in terms of the “double appearance” of meaning as both ground and content. ... As with signifier and signified there is a rigorous “correlation” between linguistic and spiritual essence [conscious being], *yet the two must not be confused*. The supposition that the terms in each of the two pairings are identical opens up “the *abyss* into which all theory of language threatens to fall” (2011, Ch. 5: 132).

It might well be that this reflects an intermediate idea in a passage toward the eventual alternative to Neo-Kantian semiotic theory articulated by Benjamin in “On Language as such ...” But as it stands, it is garbled. Having already mistakenly attributed to Benjamin the identity of the idea and the word in which it is communicated, Benjamin is here said to deny the identity of linguistic and conscious being; an assertion that clearly contradicts the text. Rather, Benjamin reasons along these lines (1916c: 316-21). Beginning, as he suggested, with the hypothesis of conscious and linguistic being an identity, each object *consciously grasped* by a subject, is thereby communicated to the subject in *language as such*. This does not imply, as it would seem, a tautology of idea and name because ideas (such as language itself) exist in unconscious (silent) forms as well. It follows that like all other beings the human subject can only communicate itself in language. However all objects that humans are conscious of--including of course both the self and other subjects--communicate themselves only to humans. Implicitly, Benjamin thereby delineates the social whole as the specific *Umwelt* of humans (Uexkull, 1940). Human language is spoken language,-whereby human subjects

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mutually experience self in relation to other in open time and closed time (1916c: 318). Benjamin's first claim, then—the hypothesis that the identity of conscious and linguistic being solves the paradox of solipsism—is provided support. Intrinsic to human language is that conscious being is inter-subjective; the self is a *social* subject. It is only through dialogue that language comes alive as transgredient, absorbing experience into an idea. “[I]n name appears the essential law of language, according to which to express oneself and address everything else amounts to the same” (1916c: 319) One of the leading contemporary dialogicians, Ragnar Rommetveit, succinctly captures Benjamin's insight here in two of the first three (out of twenty-four) brief general statements he lists as a guide to a “dialogical approach to human cognition”:¹⁶

(1) Human cognition is inherently dual, in the sense that its product is informative about the observer as well as about the observed.

(3) Different potential aspects of our “external” world (*i.e.*, of objects, events, actions and other *not-yet-verbally described* states of affairs) are generated when states of affairs are made sense of and “brought into” language from different positions [quotation marks and italics by Rommetveit] (1992: 21-2).¹⁷

Benjamin's second claim, that the solution to the paradox is “central to linguistic theory,” refers to the unveiling of a major fracture in Cartesian/Kantian logic. In so doing it unveils a perhaps disturbing (Kafkaesque) world of fundamental social relativity in open and closed time. “Our art is an art that is dazzled by truth: the light shed on the rapidly fleeing grimace is true—nothing else is” (Kafka, 1917-18; Aphorism 63). Like Shakespearian tragedy, Cartesian/Kantian logic effects a messianic reduction to a natural world external to (a “residue of”) the subject. It is still, however, a world exclusively in closed time; *i.e.*, based on the ergodic axiom. “The fact that the only world is a constructed world takes away hope and gives us certainty” (Kafka, 1917-18; Aphorism 62). Social relativity, on the other hand, emblematically the performance of the *Trauerspiel*,

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is a flow of inter-subjective activity in open time. “These plays represent the stemming of nature ... to which a new world suddenly opens up in the word, the world of ... unfeeling historical time ... (1916b: 247).” Similarly, the comic hero, like each human subject in open time, engages in the mirror-nature of game and play, orienting self to other, other to self, experiencing the social whole while acting in its creation.

Beasley-Murray aptly sums up the force of Benjamin’s break with neo-Kantian semiotics, (as well as that of Bakhtin and Volosinov), which propels each of them in the direction of a general philosophical critique wedded to dialogism:

We now see the reason for the significance that Bakhtin and ... Benjamin ascribe to language. Language becomes the medium in which the fundamental schism that opened up in Western philosophy since Descartes, the schism between cognizing subject and cognized object-world, is revealed as already healed. As [Raymond] Williams comments of Volosinov’s conception of language: ‘It is of and to this experience—the lost middle term between the abstract entities “subject” and “object”, on which the propositions of idealism and orthodox materialism are erected—that language speaks (2007: 92-3).

Words: 9,000 (approximate)

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Endnotes

¹ However, as entre into Benjamin's thinking Fenves depends very heavily on random notes ascribed to Benjamin, as well as letters of his written during the period. These were not written for publication, and often the context is ambiguous, so they are not used here as sources.

² This axiom is fundamental to theoretical research in natural science (as well as in economics, notably "rational expectations theory").

Important physical theories are built on relations and/or equations obtained through experiments, intuition and analogies. Hypotheses are proposed and experimentally and theoretically tested, then corrections are proposed and sometimes even "revolutions" occur.

[For example] the prescription for equilibrium statistical mechanics is a link between microscopic dynamics and macroscopic thermodynamics via an invariant probability distribution.

It is natural to wonder how to justify such kind of physical relations by means of "first principles;" at least to make them plausible. [This example] is particularly intriguing, since it involves two descriptions of the same physical system, one of them time reversible (the microscopic dynamics) and the other with irreversible behavior (macroscopic thermodynamics). The justification of such prescription is one of the most fascinating

problems of physics, and here the so-called ergodic hypothesis intervenes (and it was the birth of ergodic theory) (Olivier and Werlang, 2007: 189-90).

³ See *Bakhtin Circle: in the Master's Absence* (Brandist et. al., 2004). The one extended study, known to us, linking Benjamin and the Russian dialogicians is Tim Beasley-Murray's *Mikhail Bakhtin and Walter Benjamin: Experience and Form* (2007). We will have occasion to refer to this work herein; this paper in certain respects is complementary to it.

⁴ Elsewhere (e.g., 1924/25: 102), Benjamin refers to this as the "philosophical historical," and explicitly indicates that it subsumes the aesthetic.

⁵ We use this term in the sense it is used by Bakhtin, succinctly put by Todorov (1984, 95) as follows:

[Bakhtin] uses [transgressions] in a complementary sense to "ingredients" to designate elements of consciousness [which] are external to it, but nonetheless absolutely necessary for its completion, for its achievement of totalization.

⁶ Fenves helpfully points out the collection entitled "Aphorisms" (1915b) consists of brief unlabeled fragments, whose source is a notebook of Gershom Scholem's. They are largely notes taken by Scholem of remarks putatively made by Benjamin.

⁷ Perhaps a more fitting word than "guilt" in the context of messianic time—is *answerability*, a term used by Bakhtin; in contemporary parlance, the one who "owns the act." Guilt then is a specific form of answerability attached to law. As we shall return to in due course, in Benjamin's view guilt, in this more narrow sense, is a creature of messianic reduction (see Benjamin, 1921: 294-5).

⁸ This is exquisitely captured in Kafka's *The Trial* (ca. 1914).

⁹ In this context, Benjamin cites the traits of miserliness and hypochondria, as treated in, respectively, Moliere's "L'avare" and "Le malade imaginaire."

¹⁰ This is in line with a succinct formulation of Benjamin's, found in the fragment "Types of History": "Man is neither a phenomenon nor an effect, but [a being in creation] (1918: 115). (The last phrase is translated as "a created being." Understood in English this would imply an effect, which the passage explicitly is saying it is not.)

¹¹ The aphorism is: "The problem of historical time is already given with the peculiar form of historical time. The years can be counted but in contrast to most things countable, not numbered (1915: 271)." This can be interpreted simply to mean that the *form* of historical time is, in Benjamin's words, "nothing but the measure by which the duration of a mechanical change is reckoned ..." He writes, "This sort of time is indeed a relatively empty form, and to think of its being filled makes no sense" (1916a: 241). Thus, as Benjamin sees it, this form of time provides an ordinal measure, a consistent ranking of units; a before and after. But it is not capable of a cardinal measure. In short, the aphorism asserts that numerical comparison of individual years as fulfilled time is impossible.

¹² In this context, the corruption of moral relativism in the wake of the messianic reduction, as discussed in reference to "Fate and Character," appears in "Tragedy and *Trauerspiel*" as well, but with regard to the shaping of time. "[I]t is all-important to ask what it is that the sin of individuation offends against." And Benjamin clarifies this—"We are not speaking here of an individuation to be comprehended with reference to man"—emphasizing that it is the individuation of time that he is referring to, not that of individual character traits, since the reference to latter would imply a tragic hero is an active (undetermined) subject. (1916a: 243).

¹³ From Kafka's "Great Wall of China":

[T]he emperor, as such, is indeed mighty through all the many levels of the world. Yet *the living* emperor, a man like us, lies much as we do on a couch, which for all its generous proportions is still comparatively narrow and short (1917: 66).

¹⁴ Volosinov refers to as this as "the utterance," which he characterizes as "the basic unit in the generative process of speech" (1929, Ch. 3: 83).

¹⁵ At the outset of Chapter 5 Fenves discusses Benjamin's solution to Russell's Paradox. It is echoed in "On Language as such and on the Language Man." Language is an idea that communicates itself in itself. Fenves quotes Benjamin as follows:

Russell designates a word to which one can attribute its meaning as a predicate ... predicable. He designates a word in which this is not the case unpredictable. ... The subjects in [the resulting paradoxical formulations] are signs; that is, as complexes fixed in sound and writing, *they do not mean anything* (20011, Ch. 5: 128).

¹⁶ Citing Volosinov (1929: 40; 103) specifically, observes the same insight respecting language on the part of the Bakhtin circle (Beasley-Murray: 88-92).

¹⁷ The paper, "The Asymmetric Dualism of the Linguistic Sign" (1929) by the Prague school linguist, Sergi Karcevskij, addresses the features of spoken language that enable a new idea to communicate itself in it. He sets out what is required as follows:

On the one hand, language must supply a means of communication for all the members of a linguistic community. But on the other hand, it must serve equally as a means of self-expression for each of the individuals *in this community*, and however 'socialized' the forms of our psychic life may be, *the individual cannot be reduced to the social*" (1929, 49).